ERIC Digest 169 - June 2003

The Mandate To Help Low-Performing Schools

By Larry Lashway

The twentieth anniversary of A Nation at Risk has inspired numerous retrospective looks at the last two decades of school reform. The verdict is usually the same: noteworthy progress, but lots of unfinished business.

High on the to-do list is the stubborn problem of low-performing schools in which a majority of students persistently fail to meet academic standards. Despite repeated reform efforts, many of these institutions are not performing much better than they did in 1983.

While images of failed schools have long been a motivating force in educational reform, the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has created a new sense of urgency. Confronted with a steadily rising bar for achievement, schools that lag behind will lose students, autonomy, and perhaps even their right to exist.

Moreover, educators and citizens are realizing that low-performing schools go hand in hand with the achievement gap. Many struggling schools serve largely minority populations whose test scores persistently fall below those of white students. In an age when testing carries high stakes for students, the potential social consequences give the issue even greater significance.

Turning around a school is a complex process in which clear cause-effect relationships are difficult to isolate, but the recent interest has generated some useful research and thoughtful analysis. This Digest explores some of the key insights from that literature.

How Are Low-Performing Schools Defined?

For all the attention devoted to low-performing schools, precise definitions remain elusive. Traditionally, the low-performing label has been applied with a broad brush to “bad” schools having a wide range of perceived deficiencies: low academic expectations and achievement, high dropout rates, lack of discipline, inadequate facilities, and demoralized staff. While accounts of such schools are often anecdotal, the teachers, principals, and parents who tell the anecdotes can easily name the schools to avoid.

More recently, low performance has been defined by failure to achieve state-mandated accountability targets, particularly test scores. By this measure, some 8,652 U.S. schools were considered low-performing in 2002 (National Association of State Boards of Education 2002). However, that number

encompasses a wide range of performance, since states have different goals, tests, and criteria for judging success.

NCLB has sharpened the focus on test scores by requiring schools to boost achievement across all subgroups (including low-income, racial minorities, and second-language learners). Schools in which even one group fails to make progress will be considered low-performing.

Thus, while many low-performing schools under NCLB undoubtedly resemble the traditional stereotype of "bad schools," others are more accustomed to success and will find themselves surprised to be among the underachievers.

Why Do Schools Perform Poorly?

Over the years, researchers and analysts have provided a variety of explanations for low performance. Three have received the most attention.

Demographics. Some schools serve low-income children living under highly stressful conditions that inhibit learning. The issue is not just low income, but an environment that destabilizes home life, undermines support, and creates despair. In addition, many low-income children are also members of racial minorities that face additional barriers to high achievement (Shannon and Bylsma 2002).

Insufficient resources. Perhaps not surprisingly, low-performing schools in low-income areas are frequently plagued by a lack of resources. For example, Greg Orlofsky (2002) found that high-poverty, high-minority schools received significantly less state and local money than did other schools; also, students in such schools were almost twice as likely to be taught by teachers who were inexperienced or teaching outside their specialties (Jerald 2002).

Ineffective school practices. While high poverty and limited resources are not trivial challenges, some schools succeed despite the odds (Jerald 2001). Their example suggests that low performance is not inevitable. Uncoordinated curriculum, superficial instructional strategies, scattershot professional development, and timid leadership are some of the factors that may hold schools back.

Undoubtedly, many cases of low performance result from a confluence of forces. Students at high academic risk are assigned to a school with limited resources, making it difficult to initiate (much less sustain) improvement efforts. The perceived undesirability of the school leads teachers, principals, and parents to look elsewhere for opportunities, creating further instability. Finding a way to break into this vicious cycle is the key challenge for reformers.

Do Sanctions Improve Low-Performing Schools?

While standards-based accountability implicitly recognizes that low-performing schools may face consequences, many states have been hesitant to intervene except in extreme cases. By contrast, NCLB

prescribes a variety of interventions when schools fail to meet improvement goals. Some interventions are relatively low-key, such as providing technical assistance or requiring the school to develop an improvement plan. Others are more aggressive, holding out the possibility of major changes in governance, including state takeovers.

A number of states have already experimented with sanctions such as reconstitution (replacing personnel and/or installing new curricula and philosophies) and state takeovers (removing local authority over the low-performing schools).

Thus far, research on takeovers and reconstitutions has been inconclusive, partly because these are relatively new strategies, and partly because such wholesale changes make it difficult to isolate the relevant variables (Education Commission of the States [ECS] 2002).

Lack of dramatic or immediate results is not surprising. Reconstitution and takeovers do not by themselves provide detailed blueprints for success. The new managers are still left with the question, "Now what?"

In its review of the intervention literature, ECS concluded that the success of strong sanctions may be dependent on the local context. The specific combination of interventions being used, the amount of time allowed for improvement, the amount of support provided, and the degree of buy-in from local stakeholders may all influence the results. ECS analysts concluded that reconstitution and takeovers should be keyed to achieving specific educational changes, not just to replacing management in the hope that something better will happen.

How Can External Assistance Help Low-Performing Schools?

Policymakers generally view the breaking up of a school as a last resort, and they prefer positive state or district action. Recent reviews have identified several promising practices.

1. *Provide technical assistance*. David Holdzkam (2001) has described the steps taken by several states to provide intensive, focused assistance to the schools that need it most. Their programs include targeting the neediest schools, thoroughly auditing school needs, and bringing in specially trained principals, teachers, and curriculum specialists to act as facilitators for change. While no formal research appears to be available, Holdzkam cites state officials who say that while the intervention has not always moved schools out of the low-performing category, it has sometimes boosted them into the highest-performing category.

2. *Align policies and practices with academic goals*. In a multi-tiered governance system (federal, state, and local), schools have often been subject to disjointed or contradictory policies, zigging one way to satisfy a state or federal mandate and zagging back again to keep the district office happy. However, states have made major strides in aligning goals, instruction, and assessment (and sometimes teacher preparation), sending a consistent message that helps keep schools on track. When states and districts

use their authority to articulate and support a common academic vision, school leaders can align their own efforts accordingly (NASBE; Tognieri and Anderson 2003).

3. *Allocate resources to support achievement.* Does money make a difference? The answer seems to be yes. Diane Pan and colleagues (2003) examined achievement data and spending patterns in four states, and found "a strong relationship between resources and student success," particularly when the resources were directed toward core instructional areas rather than general administration. The authors of the study found lessons for state, district, and local leaders about the importance of allocating adequate money and targeting it intelligently.

How Can Principals Turn Around Low-Performing Schools?

External assistance can facilitate school renewal, but effective leadership at the school site is essential. Although empirical research has not uncovered a single "best strategy" for low-performing schools, researchers and analysts have identified some promising approaches.

For example, the Washington School Research Center (2002) interviewed teachers and administrators at elementary schools in which the percentage of students meeting state standards was significantly above the state average. They found four "primary factors": a caring and collaborative environment, strong leadership, focused, intentional instruction, and the use of assessment data to guide instruction. In addition, the researchers were struck by the high degree of teacher support for reform efforts, despite the shift in teaching practice that was required. Significantly, these patterns were the same for high-poverty and low-poverty schools.

Similarly, research in Texas (Just for the Kids, Inc. 2000) has identified half a dozen promising practices used by high-performing schools with low-income students:

• High-energy, hands-on principal leadership that articulates the vision and keeps the school focused on instruction

• Broad-based planning that sets clear instructional priorities and meaningful benchmarks for improvement

• Focused, research-based professional development that is driven by identified instructional needs

• Continual monitoring and assessment

• Flexible grouping for instruction based on identified student needs

• Immediate intervention for struggling students

While suggestive, these studies of successful schools do not yet yield a detailed roadmap for principals

taking the reins at low-performing schools. Even in comprehensive school reform, which provides concrete models and resources, implementation varies considerably from school to school (Murphy and Datnow 2003).

But even at this early stage of research it seems evident that turning around a school requires leaders who nurture an educational vision, keep a laser-like focus on instruction, and work to build a professional learning community.

RESOURCES

Education Commission of the States. State Interventions in Low-Performing Schools and School Districts. Denver, Colorado: Education Commission of the States, 2002. Online at http://www.ecs.org/

Holdzkom, David. “Low-Performing Schools: So You’ve Identified Them—Now What?” Charleston, West Virginia: AEL, 2001. 16 pages. ED 463 566. Online at http://www.ael.org/

Jerald, Craig D. Dispelling the Myth Revisited: Preliminary Findings from a Nationwide Analysis of “High-Flying” Schools. Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, 2001. 27 pages. ED 462 485. Online at http://www.edtrust.org/

————————. All Talk, No Action: Putting an End to Out-of-Field Teaching. Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, 2002. 16 pages. ED 468 741. Online at http://www.edtrust.org/

Just for the Kids, Inc. Promising Practices Study of High Performing Schools. Austin, Texas: Just for the Kids, Inc., 2000. Online at http://www.just4kids.org/

Murphy, Joseph, and Amanda Datnow. “Leadership Lessons from Comprehensive School Reform Designs.” In Leadership Lessons from Comprehensive School Reforms, edited by Joseph Murphy and Amanda Datnow. 263-278. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 2003.

National Association of State Boards of Education. From Sanctions to Solutions: Meeting the Needs of Low-Performing Schools. Alexandria, Virginia: National Association of State Boards of Education, 2002. Online at http://www.nasbe.org/

Orlofsky, Greg F. The Funding Gap: Low-Income and Minority Students Receive Fewer Dollars. Washington, D.C.: The Education Trust, 2002. 12 pages. ED 468 550. Online at http://www.edtrust.org/

Pan, Diane; Zena Rudo; Cynthia L. Schneider; and Lotte Smith-Hansen. Examination of Resource Allocation in Education: Connecting Spending to Student Performance. Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2003. Online at http://www.sedl.org/

Shannon, G. Sue, and Peter Bylsma. Addressing the Achievement Gap: A Challenge for Washington State Educators. Olympia, Washington: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2002. Online at http://www.k12.wa.us/

Tognieri, Wendy, and Stephen E. Anderson. Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do To Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools. Washington, D.C.: Learning First Alliance, 2003. Online at http://www.learningfirst.org/

Washington School Research Center. Bridging the Opportunity Gap: How Washington Elementary Schools Are Meeting Achievement Standards. Seattle: Author, 2002. Available online at http://www.spu.edu/wsrc